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A Comparative Study on the Nature of Visits to the Veterinary Practice by Indoor-Only Cats Versus Free Roaming Pet Cats

Emily Sharp and Lizzie Atkins

INTRODUCTION

The domestic cat is one of the most popular pets in the United Kingdom; however, there are still many owners with differing views on how best to keep them. The decision on whether to allow a cat outdoor access to roam or to keep them confined indoors appears to be largely based upon personal preference. Some owners believe that allowing their cats outside exposes them to potentially avoidable risks, where others believe it is unnatural to confine a cat to a life indoors.

Research objective: to provide the veterinary industry with evidence-based knowledge to support their important role in educating owners of considerations towards the chosen lifestyle for their pet cat.

METHODS

An online questionnaire, via Typeform®, was distributed widely across the United Kingdom through social media websites such as Facebook and online forums, for example “CatChat”, with participation entirely voluntary.

The survey was aimed at cat owners within the United Kingdom. It was designed to gain an understanding into owner opinions and reasons for their chosen method of lifestyle for their cat.

The questionnaire was made up of open and closed questions and took a multimodal research approach.

An initial pilot study was carried out to highlight any potential problems prior to commencement and ethical guidelines regarding anonymity and respondent age were adhered to.

Descriptive statistics were formulated from responses and content analysis was carried out by the researcher to identify key themes within the data.

RESULTS

A total of 91 respondents completed the survey, and of those, 58% (n=52) of owners allowed their cats free access outside, 30% (n=32) kept their cats indoors, and the remaining 12% (n=13) allowed outdoor access only with supervision. Only 1% (n=1) of these owners stated that they discussed their decision with members of a veterinary team.

Results found that almost 50% of the cats allowed outside had visited a veterinary practice for treatment of an injury obtained whilst outdoors, the most common injury being a cat bite abscess (50%), followed by road traffic accidents (17%).

Responses for indoor-only cats highlighted several medical conditions commonly associated with inactivity or obesity, such as diabetes. Interestingly, there was very little difference between the categories of cat lifestyle and the overall medical conditions diagnosed, 15% for outdoor, 19% for indoor and 18% for those supervised outside.

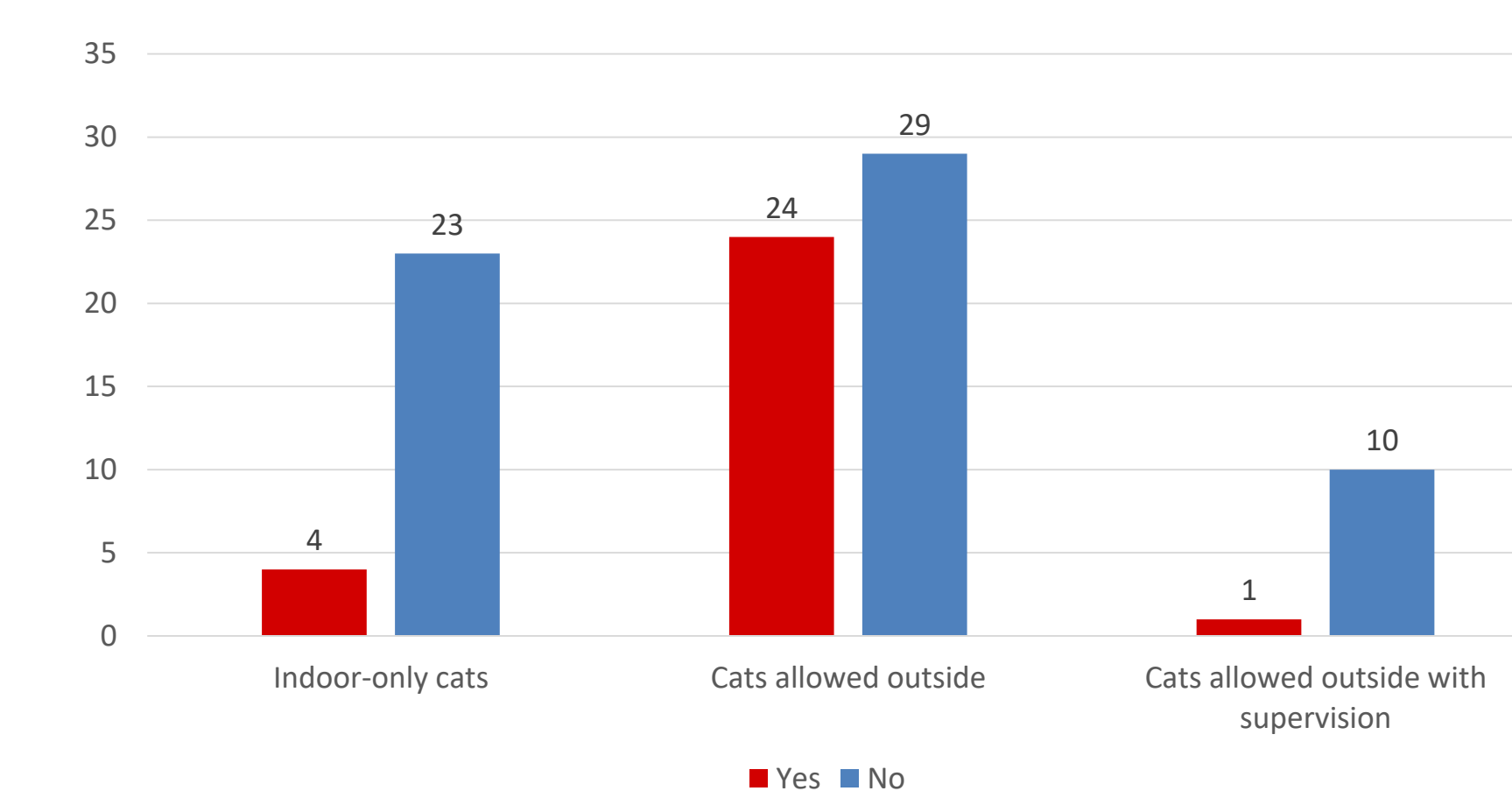


Figure 4.0: 'Has your cat ever sustained an injury requiring veterinary treatment as a direct result of being outside?'

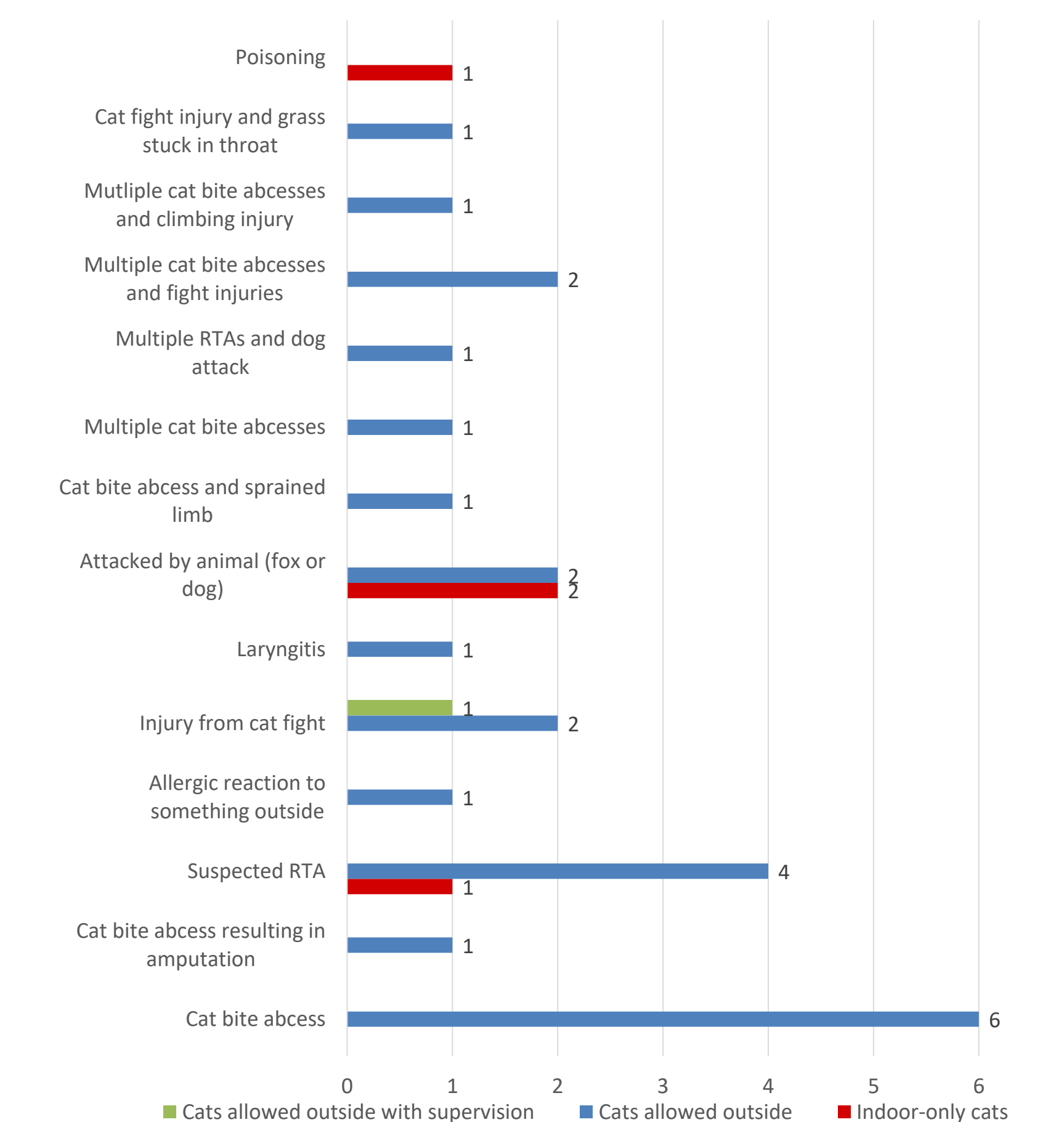


Figure 5.0: Injuries from outside requiring treatment

CONCLUSIONS

The study may suggest that those cats with outdoor access are not necessarily medically healthier than indoor-only cats; however, they are more likely to experience veterinary intervention for injury.

Veterinary practices could be doing more to educate owners on the advantages and disadvantages of both indoor-only and outdoor access of cats. Owner education on these benefits and drawbacks could help owners to identify potential issues before they become more serious, contributing to the overall health and welfare of owned cats.